

PERSIA TODAY

A REVIEW OF *PERSIA*,¹ BY SIR ARNOLD WILSON

A COUNTRY as ancient as Persia, with so long and interesting a history, filled with so many picturesque, dramatic, and significant events, is in serious danger of being overshadowed by its own past. The Westerner is more apt to know Persia as the land of Cyrus and Xerxes, or Bahram Gur, the Mighty Hunter, or Hafiz, or Omar Khayyam, according to his tastes and knowledge, than as an actual country of twelve million people, endowed with great possibilities, but facing equally great perplexities and dangers. Yet Persia, the actual political and economic entity, is not only interesting but important, first because in our closeknit world no unit of twelve million people can be disregarded, and second, and more important, because some of the problems with which Persia is confronted are essentially our own problems, seen more vividly, partly because they are a smaller and more concentrated scale, but even more because they are in a stage of rapid and very clearly defined transition. It is especially this phase of Persia which is so graphically and competently presented by Sir Arnold Wilson in his new book, *Persia*.

For Persia is now hesitating at the confluence of three possible courses, and because she is hesitating, she is assessing basic values. In this position she is, indeed, but perpetuating an ancient rôle, for her geographical location has made her in many previous epochs, probably even in some of the major prehistoric migrations, a crossroads. The massive hosts from the Russian and Central Asian plains have time and again been a physical determinant in her affairs; from another side the strained other-worldliness of India has repeatedly infiltrated, but most notably when Buddhism passed on its way to transformation by other cultures; while from the west, Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines delivered blow after blow. The crossroads at which Persia now is indecisive is less spatial than it is temporal, but the conflicting influences are the same: Russia, changed now from a physical factor to an economic and social theory of materialism; India, still trying to deny the facts of this world; or the West, still overrunning itself in an unaimed activity. Shall she follow Lenin, or Ghandi, or be pulled along by

¹New York, Scribners 1933: London, Ernest Beun, 1932.

the third force for which no individual can be the figure, because it happens without intent?

Of the brief moment when the Russian social form might have been at least the experimental choice, Sir Arnold Wilson gives a succinct but specific account (pp. 144 ff.). Allowing for an evident strong bias against this point of view, it still seems clear that the difficulties which have so tried Russia in making a transition from an agricultural and partially even pastoral stage, directly to a state which presupposes highly organized industrialism, might have been disastrous in Persia, where feudalism and nomadism are far larger proportionate factors, and where, moreover, as Sir Arnold shows (p. 65), the agriculture is not readily subject to industrialized exploitation and the nomadism is a basic value in the national economy. It does not, therefore, look as if Persia would or perhaps even could refashion her national life by a leap to the future.

But, on the other hand, it seems even less probable that she will try the solution by evasion of attempting to withdraw into her own past. For despite the strain of mysticism in the Persian tradition, which found one exquisite expression in the Sufi lyricism of Hafiz, the Persian mind is too acutely intellectual to ignore actual facts. The Asiatic way out would almost certainly mean, moreover, the acceptance of an Islamic bloc (p. 169), but the intellectual Persian on whom devolves the responsibility of the decision is too much a man of his time to be a man of faith.

Persia then seems doomed to be engulfed in the current Western process, in spite of the overwhelming demonstration of its failure from which the world is already suffering. It remains only to see what phase of it will prevail, what ameliorations she can devise, to what extent, if any, she can escape from the penalties involved.

The Persians of the ruling class, thanks to the keen intelligence of the race, are very clearly aware of the alternatives. Will their country find a happier fate following a French model or have they more to gain from taking Nordic lessons? Each has its adherents, but the two camps seem, according to the interesting quotations which Sir Arnold gives (pp. 163 ff.), to be quite agreed on one prior point. The Persian mind is essentially Latin in its structure and functioning. It is only, then, a question of whether the salutary course is to flatter the native equipment and leave it to its easier sympathies or, on the contrary, to try to right the balance by the

stern discipline of a more alien but complementary training.

The dispute as to the relative values for Persians of the French versus the Germano-English culture is quite old and appears in the most unexpected places, but it has now, especially since the War, been further complicated by the interjection of America into the possibilities. The European countries, having all long since attained to an age of natural imperialism, have, through their nationals engaged in various services in Persia, sought each to further his own party in this contest, so that an American involved in any way in Persian interests, though typically absorbed in the most naïve altruism, is at once suspected of being another emissary of national proselytism. It seems impossible for the older peoples, whether European or Asiatic, to realise that the occasional American who is sophisticated enough to be aware of his country having a specific culture, is by virtue of that same degree of sophistication far from desirous of imposing it elsewhere.

It is doubtful whether the Persians will really be free to make even their Hobson's choice. Now that they are caught on the relentless, revolving belt of the economics of the current Western world, their fate will probably be subject to but little deflection. For a time it seemed certain that Persia would be absorbed by the British octopus, but this crisis, too, passed immediately after the War, in an episode which provoked, as a reaction, the present Persian régime, and of which Sir Arnold, despite his sympathies, gives a revealing account (pp. 135 ff.). Those once long and powerful tentacles are now withering fast, so that they cannot hold that which they already have, much less reach out to grab elsewhere. Kultur is even more crippled, for at least a generation. There remain France, which in proportion as she has been less ostentatious in her expansionism may prove to be more enduring, and America, whose grossly overgrown productive system will certainly in the future (unless in the meantime it modifies distribution sufficiently to permit proportionate consumption, which is improbable) have to stretch wherever there is a chance.

At the moment Persia is trying to protect herself with strict control of her international trade. This she could have done if she had been able to remain within the old limits of her standard of living, for in those terms she was almost or wholly self-sustained. But oil and world-war and perhaps, even apart from these, the in-

escapable processes of existence have caught her on the wheel. She is already suffering in stringency and currency depression. It is only a question of how much she can be spared.

A major special circumstance complicating her problem is the importance of opium in her total budget. It is, according to the useful summary given in this book (p. 56 ff.), second only to petroleum as an export, providing (still excluding petroleum), more than half the export total value. The substitution of other products to compensate for the loss that would be involved in restricting the opium output proportionate to the world's medical needs (and this is the only way of dealing effectively with illicit traffic) is conditioned primarily on the development of internal transport and involves the outlay of considerable capital. This has not been available from local sources, and Persia, too intelligent to ignore the fate of certain neighbors, has mistrusted international loans. Sir Arnold cuts the knot with the aristocrat's sword, the conclusion that the human being who has to be saved from drugs (or indeed from anything else) is thereby proven to be not worth the saving. The demonstration is as unshakable as the conversion of a proposition, but like conversion, is not of much help in advancing the case, for while it would be final in a monadic world, even atoms impinge on each other, and are held together in a system of mutual relations. The drug addict does prove himself not worth saving ethically and quite probably biologically, but this means of destroying him represents a terrific waste, both economically and in derivative human misery. Persia has officially expressed its intention of withdrawing, as conditions permit, from complicity, but certainly she cannot be expected to be the only or even the first country to make a great monetary sacrifice for the sake of human good. The world looks, though thus far in vain, to a greater power to take the lead.

The question of transport which conditions the opium solution is another major feature in suspension in the transformation of Persia into a modern state, and here again Sir Arnold has an excellent if somewhat confusingly complicated account (pp. 101 ff.) with a delightful glimpse of the whole fascinating story of roads, traffic, and transient shelter, confusing only because of the one serious defect of the book, the most unfortunate failure to supply

a map. Persia is like the (old-fashioned) child telling its shoe buttons, but chanting "railway, camel, aeroplane, bus," and just now the bus, and its freight concomitant, the truck, distinctly have it. There are bits of railways here and there, and a new section was inaugurated just a year or two ago, but trains to be really useful have to go, not only somewhere, but also somewhere else, so that bits hardly suffice, and it will take money, time, and much travail of various sorts to hitch those bits into a continuity. The aeroplane service, which has been such a blessing to travelers, has been temporarily halted by the world paralysis of credit. Roads, on the other hand, are reasonably good for most of the major transits, and a Ford, however battered, can carry an amazing cargo, human and otherwise. To be sure, even a Ford may resent too many extra straws, for while its back is not apt to break, it may very likely tip over at a mountain turn, often with fatal results. But the Persian mental agility gives them a taste for novelty, so that even a series of bloody wrecks does not deter them from moving about, and moving about by preference in automobiles, still new enough to be interesting. Indeed, the motor car has been so popular that shipments of goods were commonly made by truck which could go quite as well and much cheaper by pack, an error that was very trying to the ancient and still useful profession of camel drivers. These latter, however, undertook to meet the mistakes of modernity with one of its own devices, advertising. Mr. Pope tells of being awakened one morning in Isfahan by the most tremendous and multiple clamor. All the bells of Persia of every size and tone seemed to be clashing and clanging. And so they were, everything from a locomotive bell down to strings of tiny silver bells, and all hung on camels who were, besides, decorated beyond the utmost circus dreams with carpets, old draperies, strips of vivid cloth, and multiple odds and ends, parading through the city to demonstrate on huge signs their economic value in freight carriage.

The average Persian, of course, would be hard put to it to recognize his country or himself in this conceptualized account of economic problems. To him, as to the normal human the world over, life is a process of satisfying the basic instincts in the conditions as he finds them, taking advantage of these when they are favorable, escaping or enduring them when they are not. And this Persian, too, Sir Arnold Wilson takes into account, in vivid, brief

descriptions of individuals and episodes recalled from his own long personal experience in Persia, as well as in more general accounts of the universal phases of daily life, the family and its domicile, health and education, maintenance and its labors, the cult or its intellectual substitutes, relaxations and rewards. These Sir Arnold presents, not at great length, but with a richness of both information and acquaintance which makes the descriptions specific and actual, the more so since there is implicit throughout a realization of qualities which are revealed only to the more penetrating vision that is the fulfilment of a wide and reflective wisdom of life. This detached and critical estimate of larger purposes renders him especially appreciative of the Persians' regard for and enjoyment of the intrinsic in a humane life, beauty and the satisfaction of deft and meticulous craftsmanship, a flower, the shade of rustling trees, and above all, leisure with good talk, ideas expressed in felicitous phrases or, a feature of Persian conversation, with an apt and unexpected turn of wit.

The Persian mind and its culture, as he discloses it, is one of the fine intrinsic values in human history, a value still very real but very imminently menaced by the tide of Western confusions, accomplishments, errors, and elaboration which is about to sweep the country. But five thousand years and more of vicissitudes are not apt to terminate in defeat by mere mechanization, so that future generations may still know unimpaired this especially gifted and delightful human family, highly composite but still essentially of the Aryan race, and that Persian charm so intimately conveyed in dozens of little touches by Sir Arnold, "the magic of Persia" which, "as was said four thousand years ago of her law, . . . altereth not."

P. A.

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